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To the Starry Island and Spring in my Hometown**

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SOUTH KOREAN FILMS ABOUT THE KOREAN WAR: *TO THE STARRY ISLAND* AND *SPRING IN MY HOMETOWN*¹

By ANDREW DAVID JACKSON

This article investigates representations of the Korean War in South Korean cinema, focussing on Pak Kwangsu's *To the Starry Island* and Yi Kwangmo's *Spring in My Hometown* and using the notion of cultural imagination, in which cinematic representations contribute to collective understandings of war. The article builds from Isolde Standish's 1992 analysis, which argued 1990s Korean War films took an opposite stance to previous representations of the war while continuing to rely on nationalistic and melodramatic discourses. This article argues that in terms of their representation of the causes and character of the Korean War and their formal characteristics, Korean War films from the 1960s onwards are marked by continuity and rely on many of the discourses identified by Standish to account for the conflict; namely an externalisation of blame, problem-solving violence, and a narrative structure that displaces historical problems onto individual dramas. I argue *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* are unique because they place a far greater burden of blame on the Korean population and provide genuine critiques of the Korean War's destruction. The films produce more ambiguous readings of the violence and identify reprisals as a key feature of the conflict, a phenomenon largely neglected in other Korean War films. *To the Starry Island* avoids a more romanticised treatment of pre-war Korea, presenting more anonymous sites of conflict that detract from heroic narratives of national mythmaking. *Spring in My Hometown* is a formally challenging work, and both films implicate the viewer in a brutal conflict.

Keywords: Korean War, *To the Starry Island*, *Spring in My Hometown*, Pak Kwangsu, Yi Kwangmo

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INTRODUCTION

2013 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Korean War (1950–53), a conflict which still cuts deep into the consciousness of many in South (and North) Korea. The war solidified the division of the peninsula and separated friends and family.² No peace treaty was ever signed to end the war formally, and heightened political tensions in March 2013 led to the UN-sponsored armistice being torn up by the North Korean government. Widespread conscription, U.S. military presence and civil defence drills are testaments to the Korean War's lingering aftermath. This political, military and cultural presence may explain why South Korean film-makers have produced so many films examining the war, the most recent of which include: *Brotherhood* (T'aegŭkki hwinallimyŏ, dir: Kang Je-gyu, 2004), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (Welk'ŏm t'u tongmakkol, dir: Pak Kwang-hyun, 2005), *A Little Pond* (Chagŭn yŏnmot, dir: Yi Sangu, 2009), *71-Into the Fire* (P'ohwa sok ŭro, dir: Yi Chaehan, 2010), and *The Front Line* (Kojijŏn, dir: Chang Hun, 2011).

Guy Westwell argues war cinema plays an important role in the creation of what he calls the “cultural imagination of war,” the complex combination of representations “upon which a collective, shared sense of war is worked out, articulated and sometimes contested.”³ Westwell focuses on Hollywood film, but I would argue the cultural imagination of the Korean War is particularly relevant to South Koreans, for whom the actual events of the war are temporally distant but politically, geographically and culturally ever-present. The sheer number of Korean War films is a testament to cinema's central role in a system of representations in which war is “recalled, re-enacted and re-scripted.”⁴

Westwell argues that war films often appear in “cycles” representing particular “localised, industrial and cultural moves” that contribute to a cultural imagining of war.⁵ In terms of Korean War cinema, one cycle that stands out comprises 1990s films like *The Southern Army* (Nambugun, dir: Chŏng Chiyong, 1990), *Silver Stallion* (Ŭnma nŭn oji annŭnda, dir: Chang Kilsu, 1991), *To the Starry Island* (Kŭ sŏm e kago sipta, dir: Pak Kwangsu, 1993), *Taebaek Mountains* (Taebaek sanmaek dir: Im Kwŏnt'aek, 1994), and *Spring in My Hometown* (Arŭmdaun sijŏl, dir: Yi Kwangmo, 1998). Many films in this cycle (1990–1998) were produced by ‘New Wave’

² Statistically it was more dangerous to be a civilian than a soldier, and there were between a million and 2.5 million Korean civilian deaths; Rees, *Korea: The Limited War*, 461.

³ Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the frontline* (London: Wallflower, 2006): 5–7.

⁴ Westwell, *War Cinema*, 113. Where Korean War films are feature films that consider conflict between 1950 and 1953 rather than legacy pictures of post-1953 conflict between North and South Korea like *Silmido* (dir: Kang Woo-suk, 2003).

⁵ Westwell, *War Cinema*, 8–9.

directors, associated with the leftwing *minjung* (or repressed people's movement) who thought films should have a "social role and responsibility," rejected the dictatorial discourses of anticommunism and criticised the influence of the U.S.A. on Korea.⁶ The 1990s cycle has garnered much scholarly attention because it is seen by researchers like Isolde Standish (1992, 1994), Hyangjin Lee (2000), and Kyung Hyun Kim (2004) to respond in a radical way to previous representations of the Korean War exemplified by films such as *Five Marines* (O in ūi haebyōng, dir: Kim Kidōk, 1961), *The Marines who never Returned* (Toraoji annūn haebyōng, dir: Yi Manhŭi, 1963) and *Wild Flower in the Battlefield* (Tŭlgukhwa p'ionūnde, dir: Yi Manhŭi, 1974) produced during the Park Chung Hee dictatorship (1961–79); a time in which national reconstruction was being undertaken by a nationalist, authoritarian military dictatorship and a time when films had to display strict anti-communist content.⁷ The relaxed censorship that followed the collapse of the military dictatorship and the advent of free elections meant the 1990s was the first time in a generation when directors could choose their own material freely.⁸ Lee argues that after the Soviet collapse, political changes led to shifts in the cultural imagination of North Korea, and Koreans increasingly thought of the northerners as the same people, split by ideology. The result was a dramatic break with earlier cinematic treatment of the Korean War,⁹ and films began to provide more complex narrative structures that according to Kim "revised the dominant historiography focusing on the internal conflicts."¹⁰ Ultimately, Kim is critical of this cycle, because the films still "project a nationalist agenda", while Standish criticizes the films' failure to offer "tangible" solutions to the problems they raise (see analysis below).¹¹

This article builds on from Lee, Standish and Kim's analysis of the 1990s Korean War cycle to include the most recent films, but also challenges some of their conclusions about two films in particular. I argue that in several core respects,

⁶ Moon Jae-cheol, "The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After," *Korea Journal* 46.1 (Spring 2006): 57.

⁷ There are other cycles of Korean War film, notably the 1950s. There were, for example, twenty-seven Korean War films made between 1950 and 1954. See: *Han'guk yŏnghwa ch'ongsŏ* (Seoul: Han'guk yŏnghwa chinhŭng chohap, 1972): 293–294; Yi Yŏngil, *Han'guk yŏnghwa chŏnsa* (Seoul: Tosŏ ch'ulp'an sodo, 1969): 277–280.

⁸ Isolde Standish, "United in *Han*: Korean Cinema and the 'New Wave'," *Korea Journal* 32.4 (Winter 1992): 112.

⁹ Hyang-Jin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001): 104 & 130. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: Norton, 1997): 488–489.

¹⁰ Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004): 80.

¹¹ Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 80; Standish, "United in *Han*," 109.

Korean War films from the 1960s onwards are marked by continuity and that many of Kim and Standish's criticisms are also applicable to the most recent films. I consider the cinematic representations of the causes and character of the conflict. The roots of the war reveal contested issues about culpability, and the war's character provides an insight into the moral justification for the violence that ensured the survival of the South Korean state. In my analysis I pay special attention to the sites of conflict—the territories through which the Korean War is culturally imagined. I also examine formal structures such as the cinematography and narrative that help naturalize the inherent meanings of the film. These areas form the basis of my analysis of two neglected feature films from the 1990s cycle. Guy Westwell's analysis concludes that *most* war films consider the benefits and justifications for war and show them to be "convincing," and as a result films that genuinely critique war are few and far between.¹² I argue that *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* are examples of such critiques because they produce far more ambiguous meanings and do not make war feel, as Westwell argues, "right."¹³

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There are several historical features that are salient to my argument. The Korean War was at times entirely led, funded and prosecuted by United Nations forces or the communist Chinese government and virtually every major area on the Korean peninsula changed hands several times. The capture of an area brought the establishment of a new government according to radically different principles, and this often resulted in official reprisals against the representatives of the old order, like the Podo League massacres.¹⁴ There may have been countless other unofficial and unreported cases of reprisals involving civilians as self-appointed judge and jury of fellow civilians for collaboration with the enemy. Also controversial is the character of the conflict itself, which has been understood as a

¹² Westwell, *War Cinema*, 114; Westwell cites *All Quiet on the Western Front* (dir: Lewis Milestone, 1930), *Paths of Glory* (dir: Stanley Kubrick, 1957), and "possibly" *Apocalypse Now* (dir: Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) as examples of films that critique war. War cinema, Westwell argues, encourages us to think of war as a "productive mechanism of progressive change tied...to codes of honour, self-sacrifice, and national esteem...we are discouraged from questioning why and how so much life was wasted..." Westwell, *War Cinema*, 6.

¹³ Westwell, *War Cinema*, 6.

¹⁴ The United Nations estimated 20,000–22,000 deaths during the North Korean invasion (June to September 1950). In addition to the Podo League incident, South Korean army divisions massacred unarmed civilians in Sanch'ŏng, Kŏch'ang in Kyŏngsang province, and Kanghwa between 1950 and 1951. Spencer C. Tucker (Ed), *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000): 733.

civil war between the left and right, as the first conflagration of a global Cold War, as a war initiated by the Superpowers, or as blatant North Korean aggression.

ROOTS OF THE WAR

Isolde Standish argues that 1990s New Wave films place the burden of blame for national division and for the conflict onto anti-government and anti-American sentiments;¹⁵ this tendency is evident in *Silver Stallion*, of which Kyung Hyun Kim has observed the heroine Ollye is first raped by an American soldier and then as a result shunned by the traditional patriarchy represented by a village elder and forced into prostitution.¹⁶ In *The Southern Army* partisans discuss the division and conclude that ultimately the Korean people were divided by external political pressures:

Neither side will win; our tragedy is we didn't liberate ourselves from Japan because of our own strength, but because of outside forces. The only winner will be the U.S.A. or the U.S.S.R.

1990s films are clear about the forces that caused division and war, encapsulated in the words of director Pak Kwangsu that Korea was "raped" at the "hands of the colonial powers."¹⁷ In the 1990s some on the left saw the United States as an obstacle to reunification, and this cycle reflects the cultural imagination of a war for which responsibility fell on the Soviets and the Americans solely.

Korean War films from the dictatorship cycle and the 2000s also take a position on the ultimate causes of the division of the peninsula, and in most cases blame is externalized. Many dictatorship-era films place the cause of the war firmly at the door of North Korea. Any hint of South Korean culpability or aggression is avoided, as can be seen in the deliberate choice of historical action in the trench warfare of *Five Marines*, the last stand of *The Marines Who Never Returned*, and the defensive retreat of *Wild Flower in the Battlefield*. The focus is on South Korean defensive actions, rather than on the 1950 offensive border skirmishes or the UN push to the Yalu River.¹⁸ The hero of the 2011 film *The Front Line* claims the true cause of the division is the failure to deal with a ruling class of Japanese collaborators who continued to dominate South Korea after liberation. The above explanation locates the causes of conflict within Japanese

¹⁵ Standish, "United in Han," 113.

¹⁶ Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 82.

¹⁷ Tony Rayns, *Seoul Stirring: 5 Korean Directors* (London: ICA, 1994): 48.

¹⁸ Michael Robinson, *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007): 115.

colonial rule; a departure from earlier films that nevertheless shows a similar will to locate the roots of the conflict outside the Korean peninsula.

Central to the externalisation of blame is the imagination of an idyllic pre-war Korea; in reality, this was a period when the southern authorities were in a virtual state of war against leftists.¹⁹ *Brotherhood* and *Wild Flower in the Battlefield* presents that pre-war period as a Confucian paradise, emphasising filial piety, fraternity, and friendship; as Yöngsin (the protagonist's fiancé) in *Brotherhood* states: "I wish it was like this every day; no more, no less." This Confucian Utopia is shattered by the North Korean attack, which devastates the secure familial environment of the heroes. Even some 1990s films like *Taebaek Mountains*, which problematize the immediate pre-war world, make reference to a Confucian ideal that existed in an unclear Korean past. The intellectual hero Kim Myönggon (played by An Sönggi) says of a shamanic ritual he is watching: "I felt we were watching the world we had lost." Precisely which world Kim is discussing—the violent post-liberation period, or the period of brutal Japanese rule—is unclear. *The Southern Army* provides an interesting twist to this notion of a pre-war world shattered by North Koreans; in the opening moments of the film it is the peace of the North Korean protagonists that is shattered by the arrival of the UN forces—an event that forces the flight into the mountains. In many films, it is the return to or the defence of the pre-war world that legitimises the sacrifice and violence.

THE CHARACTER OF CONFLICT

Theodore Hughes argues that within recent Korean War films there is a "simultaneous desire for and rejection of action and violence, all the while casting an anxious glance at the commodification of the image upon which the success of *Hallyu* popular culture depends."²⁰ Hughes argues that the *Hallyu* films fuse apparently anti-war elements with features supposed to appeal to a mass audience. The films are critical of the violence instigated by representatives of the South Korean government against civilians, and show this violence to have been perpetrated by both sides.²¹ After the retreat of North Korean forces in *Brotherhood*, for example, we witness reprisals by southern administrators against civilians drafted into the communist party with a promise of food and shelter. Hughes also indicates that these films celebrate their technical ability to produce a thrilling

¹⁹ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 237–54.

²⁰ Theodore Hughes, "Planet Hallyuwood: Imaging the Korean War," *Acta Koreana* Vol. 14.1 (June 2011): 202. *Hallyu* or Korean wave, refers to the recent popularity of South Korean pop culture in East Asia and beyond.

²¹ Hughes, "Planet Hallyuwood," 206.

spectacle of graphic violence, which partly accounts, he argues, for their success. At the same time, films from the 2000s revel in the military violence of the southern protagonists, so no film ends with a North Korean victory in battle, even though the first few months of the Korean War saw nothing but North Korean victories. Blockbusters like *Brotherhood*, *71-Into the Fire* and *The Front Line* celebrate not only the South's military victories over the North, but South Korea's technological victory over the North Koreans, and they stress how far South Korea has progressed since the war in comparison to the North. This commodification of Korean War violence identified by Hughes, and the spectacle-driven celebration of South Korean military and technological victories, stands in stark contrast to the cultural imagining of the Korean War in 1990s films.

Dictatorship era films show no such ambivalence to the violence of South Korean forces over the North Koreans, and these films are characterised by large-scale battle sequences. We mainly venture into civilian territory to set the scene for later North Korean atrocities against non-combatants as in *The Marines Who Never Returned*. The Korean War is shown as a post June 1950 North Korean war against civilians, in which South Korean troops are engaged in 'good' violence in defence of those civilians, and audiences are encouraged to engage with the last stands of the troops. As James Kendrick argues about screen violence, the codes of honour of protagonists like those South Korean battalions in the aforementioned films allow the audience to enjoy vicariously the "violent spectacle."²² This is a pleasure principle which is more restrained but still present in the 1990s Korean War pictures, in which both sides are shown to initiate violence and to perpetrate atrocities.²³ Despite this attitude change, *The Southern Army*, like *Taeback Mountains*, is still reliant on the discourses of the previous cycle of films; especially the big spectacle battle sequences—the images of heroism and sacrifice—that contributed to the immense cost of the film.²⁴ There is, then, in all three cycles of Korean War film, an element of what Devin McKinney describes as "weak" violence; violence that has no other intention than to entertain.²⁵

Films from all cycles show a preoccupation with battlefields as locations for what Tom O'Regan argues are "nationally formative moments"; moments of victory, defeat, heroism, self-sacrifice and martyrdom that allow us to concept-

²² Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 79.

²³ Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, 130.

²⁴ Standish, "United in Han," 113.

²⁵ In contrast to "strong" violence that shows the ugliness of violence; Devin McKinney, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," *Film Quarterly*, 46(4) 1993: 17.

tualise our sense of national self.²⁶ *Wild Flower in the Battlefield* for example investigates the trials of refugees living within the Pusan Perimeter, an area encircled by North Korean forces in 1950 that became symbolic of the survival and tenacity of the South Koreans. The most recent films deal with known sites of South Korean military history—battlefields or places like No Gun ri, the site of a massacre of refugees perpetrated by U.S. forces portrayed in *A Little Pond*, or Aegokki Hill in *The Front Line*, a strategic point which changed hands numerous times in the last days of the war. In *71-Into the Fire*, it is the defence of P'ohang (on the outskirts of the Pusan Perimeter) by a small group of schoolboys drafted into the defence of the south against North Korean commandos. 1990s films like *The Southern Army* and *Taebaek Mountains* focus on an alternative site of heroism, Chölla Province, in the south west of the Korean peninsula. The area was the centre of guerrilla activity and uprisings between 1948 and 1953, but it was not the *only* place where great violence occurred (Cheju Island saw another uprising). As Sallie Yea has argued in her investigation of the area, Chölla Province for many Koreans is historically a region of dissent. It was the site of the 1980 Kwangju massacre, which for many leftists occurred with the connivance of the U.S. authorities. The choice of Chölla province seems a deliberate attempt to draw parallels between the events of 1980 and the 1950s guerrilla conflict. This perhaps reflects the cultural imagining of a location of resistance against American imperialism.²⁷ Even though the emphasis shifted over different cycles of Korean War cinema, the settings of many of the films are central to the representation of violence and these locations are associated with sites of struggle, myth making in the creation of nation, or the defence of community.

NARRATIVE AND STYLE

Isolde Standish argues that *Silver Stallion* and *The Southern Army* along with other New Wave films are marked by a narrative structure that displaces problems of the Korean division and conflict onto dramas of individuals as representative of the Korean nation.²⁸ These films, she argues, deal with historical and political problems not as historical and political problems but as solvable personal

²⁶ Tom O'Regan, "A National Cinema," in G. Turner ed, *Film Cultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁷ Sallie Yea, "Maps of Resistance and Geographies of Dissent in the Chölla Region," *Asian Studies Institute Working Paper 7*, (Victoria: University of Wellington, 1997): 2.

²⁸ Isolde Standish, "Korean Cinema and the New Realism: Text and Context," in Wimal Dissanayake ed, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

dramas.²⁹ The films displace historical issues onto a communal feeling of bitterness about past injustices or *han* that encourage an empathetic “reaffirmation of *han*.”³⁰ Standish raises a defining contradiction at the heart of films associated with a leftist movement that had claimed to have identified the political and historical causes of Korean division. Many of her observations about the substitution of fantasy and personal drama for historical discourse, however, appear to be equally applicable to both dictatorship era and recent Korean War films with no discernible political agenda.

Most recent Korean War films, like those from the dictatorship, are structured according to a mission-adventure narrative, focussing on the heroic exploits of a central protagonist attempting to achieve a clear-cut goal. The P’ohang schoolboys of *71-Into the Fire* need to protect their school building from attack to prevent the North Korean forces from reaching Pusan, and the troops of *The Front Line* need to keep hold of Aegokki Hill. The end credit interviews with survivors of P’ohang, and the ultimate futility of the struggle between North and South Koreans over Aegokki Hill is evidence of the shared *han* of the nation. The films are constructed with cinematography, soundtrack and editing that binds the audience into the narrative and encourages them to sympathise with the protagonist.³¹ Plot threads revolving around the main protagonists are resolved without ambiguity, but Korean War films are characterised by rather downbeat endings, which, according to Jin-Hee Choi, are a distinctive feature of Korean blockbusters, and perhaps an acknowledgement of the continued tragedy of division and *han* of the nation.³² Thus, the schoolboys manage to hold off the North Korean attack, the South Koreans seize Aegokki Hill, but in both films, as with 1960s and 1990s films, the battalions are often wiped out.

TO THE STARRY ISLAND AND SPRING IN MY HOMETOWN

Of all these South Korean produced Korean War films, two stand in contrast to many of the representations of the Korean War discussed above. *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* were made by directors linked to the New Wave, and while Pak Kwangsu was at the forefront of this movement, Yi Kwangmo was

²⁹ Standish, “The New Realism,” 76.

³⁰ For more on *han*, see Standish, “United in *Han*,” 116.

³¹ Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 64.

³² Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010): 48.

greatly influenced by it.³³ Because of the subject matter of the film, both directors struggled to bring their projects to the screen.³⁴ Pak Kwangsu had to form his own company and seek funding from the UK's Channel 4 films. It was only after ten years and after winning a prize at a major screenplay competition that Yi Kwangmo began to arouse interest in the project, but he still faced opposition from companies because of what was seen as a commercially unviable treatment of the subject.³⁵ Both films had literary origins; Yi Kwangmo used the entries from his father's diary,³⁶ and *To the Starry Island* is an adaptation of a novel by Lim Cheol-wu (Im Ch'öl-u). Both films were a response to perceived failings of expression in previous work. Yi Kwangmo turned to film to overcome the perceived limitations of literature, because he could express "the total and concrete experience of a human life."³⁷ Pak Kwangsu rejected theatre to reach a wider audience, but many of his early films were criticized for compromises to commercialism and representations of women.³⁸

The phenomenal success and exposure of *Spring in My Hometown* at domestic and international film festivals³⁹ was matched by critical acclaim for the release of the film within South Korea, where it was praised for its "heightened historical awareness" and the cinematography that was seen to be "unrivalled not just in Korea but in the whole world."⁴⁰ The same analytical criteria were used in Kyung Hyun Kim's in-depth academic study into the film to come to the opposite conclusion:

...the camera remains distant from the sequence of action and drama [and this] removes the horror and violence historically unleashed by class contradiction...historical reality competes with the aesthetic beauty in each shot. Then the history that is enunciated in all of these shots...is translated into the mythological, unidentifiable, and indecipherable murmuring that

³³ Gonul Donmez-Colin, "Interview with Lee Kwang-Mo," in *Celluloid* 21.2 (30 April 1999): 13. Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, 168–9.

³⁴ Peter Rist & Donato Totaro, "Lee Kwang-Mo: Where there's hope there's a way," *Cinemaya* 43 (Spring 1999): 32.

³⁵ See Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, Rist & Totaro, "Lee Kwang-Mo."

³⁶ Donmez-Colin, "Lee Kwang-Mo," 13.

³⁷ Rist and Totaro, "Lee Kwang-Mo," 32.

³⁸ Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 47; Yi Hyoin, *Hanguk ūi yŏnghwa kamdok 13-in* (Seoul: Yollin books, 1994): 239 & 247.

³⁹ *To the Starry Island* was lauded at the 1994 Three Continents Festival; *Spring in My Hometown* won six prizes at international film festivals including Hawaii and Tokyo; Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 46; Rist and Totaro, "Lee Kwang-Mo," 32.

⁴⁰ So Sŏngmin, "Yi Kwangmo kamdok *Arūmdaun sijŏl*," 29th October 1998.

can be easily consumed by the West as picturesque images from the non-West.⁴¹

Kim argued the cinematography attempts a “postcard impression of the past” that blotted out the historical depth and undermined the film’s counter-hegemonic credentials.⁴² Kim’s was the last attempt to engage seriously with the film, and, somewhat surprisingly considering their relative success, both films have fallen from view as researchers have focussed on more recent South Korean films or investigated the native roots of Korean cinema’s current success. Yi Kwangmo has never produced a full-length film on the same scale, and *To the Starry Island* is unavailable on DVD, which has stifled its exposure.

Spring in My Hometown focuses on three boys: Sŏngmin, Ch’anghŭi and Sang’ŏn, and opens at an undisclosed time after the North Korean withdrawal from an unnamed Chŏlla Province village that services a local U.S. army base. The film explores the tragic interactions between the U.S. army and locals: the pimping by Sŏngmin’s father of Ch’anghŭi’s mother to a GI, the humiliation of Sŏngmin’s father for stealing from the U.S. army base, the death of Ch’anghŭi apparently in revenge for the killing of a GI and the abandonment of Sŏngmin’s sister by her soldier boyfriend.

To the Starry Island tells of a rural fishing community on Kwisŏng Island (also in Chŏlla Province) and opens with a son trying to fulfil his father (Mun Tŏkbae)’s dying wish to be buried on the island where he was born. However, the entire community turns up to prevent the burial, and the rest of the film explains how this situation came to pass. We discover that Mun Tŏkbae was expelled by the other islanders, who suspected him of murdering his wife, an event that precipitates the tragedy.

Both *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* are in several respects films of their time, in that they characterise the conflict as an internal war between Koreans and focus on the effects of war on rural populations, and particularly the prosecution of the war by non-combatant on non-combatant. But they also stand out from other Korean War films in that they both take as their central event a characteristic feature of the War: the reprisal. In *Spring in My Hometown*, we see an unofficial, civilian-led reprisal in the opening sequence, where villagers turn on a communist sympathiser they accuse of killing other villagers in a previous settling of scores. The reprisal that initiates the action is constantly revisited throughout the film: Sang’ŏn, the communist’s son, is reprimanded by the teacher for not doing his homework (the same teacher whose parents had been executed by

⁴¹ Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 92–4.

⁴² Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, 91.

Sang'ŏn's father), and Sang'ŏn's mother is ostracized and reduced to living in a distant shack. The school children are forced to undergo anti-communist education in camps, but Sŏngmin and Ch'anghŭi refuse to take part in the chanting (Sŏngmin out of solidarity with Ch'anghŭi, whose father was presumably a communist), and Sŏngmin's uncle donates rice to Sang'ŏn's mother when the mother and son have been forced out of the village. All sides are shown to initiate violence and to perpetrate atrocities, and violence only exacerbates violence, reprisal leads to reprisal, intensifying the bitterness and solidifying the division between Koreans of different ideological persuasions.

The central event of *To the Starry Island* is an official reprisal carried out by the authorities. To identify impure elements on the island, nationalist troops masquerade as North Korean troops, encouraging islanders to denounce capitalists. After communist villagers identify their loyalties, nationalist troops reveal their deception before carrying out reprisals against the alleged communists. During this process a fence, made from a single piece of string is arranged in the school playground to separate communists from condemned capitalists. When the charade is revealed, the single piece of string demarcates the same artificial divisions of the people—but with their fates reversed. On one level this is a metaphor for the division of the Korean peninsula, but another implication is that anyone's fate could have been sealed by the artificial divisions. Some ten years before the Ro Moo-hyun (No Muhyŏn) government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate atrocities committed by South Korean state-backed forces against suspected communist sympathisers, the central event of both films is the settling of scores in reprisals—a defining and still unresolved feature of the war—and an attempt to understand what precipitated the conflict. This focus on reprisals that were initiated and aided by South Korean civilians means both *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* go beyond tendencies shown in other cycles of Korean War film, and rather than externalizing blame onto North Korea or foreign intervention the films implicate the South Korean populace in the instigation and perpetuation of conflict.

Unlike any of the other Korean War films discussed above, both *To the Starry Island* and *Spring in My Hometown* ration violence. Most of the violence in both films is implied, there is an overall absence of military hardware, and there is only one on-screen death in the entirety of both films. The war remains a constant and ominous presence, symbolised by the sound of distant artillery on the mainland and the nationalist patrol ship circling the island in *To the Starry Island*, and the constant referencing of the reprisals scene in *Spring in My Hometown*. As David Slocum has argued about violence in films in other contexts, “the threat of harm

or injury can often be as disturbing as the act itself.”⁴³ The threat of violence pervades the atmosphere of both films.

The contours of the violence we witness in *Spring in My Hometown* are explored in detail and with a stark quality in a way that defies conventions established in Korean War films. Scholars of cinematic violence have noted that our sense of what is violent is “determined, conditioned, and mediated” by previous images in film or other media.⁴⁴ And the violence in *Spring in My Hometown* is devoid of many of the stylistic techniques that mark violent scenes in previous cycles of Korean War film—such as close-up, dolly shot, montage and an accompaniment of dramatic music. The violence in the opening reprisals sequence defies convention and challenges viewer expectations in several ways. The assault is seen from a distance rather than close up. The long elevated shots position the viewer outside the violence, and yet the fixed camera and the long duration of the shots have a particular effect. The well shot is followed by a five minute sequence where the camera observes as the communist and his family are attacked by the villagers. From its elevated, unchanging position, the camera binds the audience to the action for an uncomfortable length of time. The reprisals scene is shot in deep focus, and there is much to see, particularly the picturesque mountain in the background behind the village. However, the eye is distracted by the sound of the violence in this sequence—the shrieks, curses and kicks—that emphasise the remorseless assault and give the viewer little respite. At the end of the reprisal sequence, the communist is dragged off to an uncertain fate; there is a musical bridge to the next scene, but no true resolution to this initial conflict. I would argue that by breaking conventions of violent scenes in previous films, the effect is more disturbing, and by offering no immediate resolution *Spring in My Hometown* exposes the ugliness of the conflict. As James Kendrick has observed, “Film violence is usually least enjoyable when it is taken seriously”.⁴⁵ In both films then, there is a starker, unspectacular form of violence that fails to solve anything.

The distinctive cinematography has a specific impact upon our perception of the perpetrators and victims of violence. Because of the camera distance, it is all but impossible to see facial expressions, or to distinguish one character from another, and this prevents any identification with individual protagonists. The use of long shots perhaps universalizes the characters—they could be anyone, they could be the audience or their forebears. This spectacle was perhaps an intensely uncomfortable prospect for many domestic audiences who, according to Yi

⁴³ David Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 2001): 2.

⁴⁴ Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*, (New York: Routledge, 2002): 111.

⁴⁵ James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre*, (London: Wallflower, 2009): 93.

Kwangmo, found the cinematography disorientating and complained they were unable to recognise the identity of the actors in a cast that included An Sŏnggi.⁴⁶ Likewise, the opening sequence features one of the few point-of-view shots in the entire film, and begins with the communist hiding down a well and looking up, from a position of weakness, and then cuts to the point of view of the village men looking down the well from a position of dominance. The next scene sees the communist bound up by the village men who encourage the village school teacher to participate in the torture. It is then we find out the communist has had the teacher's family executed in previous reprisals under the auspices of the North Korean forces. The impact is that it is difficult to prioritise one moral force over another; both sides are at once victims and perpetrators.

The film manages to create a more nuanced view of all the characters through the cinematography. As Hye Seung Chung points out, the almost exclusive use of long shots in the film enforces a neutral viewing position over the protagonists in the film; characters are seen from a distance, as if a "faceless gaze outside the realm of identification or anti-identification."⁴⁷ Most potentially emotive events, like the killing of the GI and the local woman, the presumed killing of Ch'anghŭi at the hands of U.S. soldiers, the actual prostitution of Ch'anghŭi's mother and the red-paint humiliation of Sŏngmin's father, occur off-camera. In other words, opportunities to score emotional points at the expense of characters or U.S. troops in the film are deliberately avoided, and this clouds the externalization of blame. I argue that the focus on the reprisals and the long-shot cinematography heightens the significance of the one death we see, challenges the notion of victimhood, and shifts responsibility for the war away from external forces and onto the Korean people.

One central feature of *To the Starry Island* is the representation of the setting, because the director provides the audience with a view of the community before, during and after the intrusion of the war. Most of *To the Starry Island* is set in a place as yet untouched by the war or by extrinsic ideological forces of communism and nationalism. Pak Kwangsu presents a pre-war island community riven by deceit, incest, adultery, domestic violence, gossip, petty jealousies, small-mindedness, bigotry and class antagonism. In fact, we witness serious intra-communal violence in the pre-war world, the abusive husband and shaman wife, the brawl between gossiping villagers, the clashes between landlord and tenant. But this is also a place where all these problems are mediated through understood methods of engagement; Mun Tŏkbae is punished by the village council, and the

⁴⁶ Donmez-Colin, "Lee Kwang-Mo," 13.

⁴⁷ Hye Seung Chung, "From Savors to Rapists: G.I.s, Women and Children in Korean War Films," *Asian Cinema* 12.1 (Spring/Summer, 2001): 114.

shaman publicly punishes a villager for wife battery. During the reprisals initiated by the nationalists masquerading as Korean People's Liberation Army troops, many of these petty divisions rise to the surface. Reactionary elements are identified and neighbour turns on neighbour, husband denounces wife. External official forces precipitated the tragedy, but the community finished itself off.

Two important points are raised by Pak Kwangsu's portrayal of the island; the first about the representation of the traditional Confucian family and the second about the forces that caused the destruction of the war. Unlike other representations of the Korean War, we do not encounter a simplistic and ideal microcosm of rural Korean society, or a Confucian paradise shattered by war. Pak Kwangsu manages to recreate a very real place with real problems.⁴⁸ But he also appears to be raising questions about traditional Confucian social hierarchies between ruler and subject, man and woman, elder and younger; structures that benefit the superior at the expense of the inferior and relations that can break down when under stress. In *To the Starry Island*, the islanders are portrayed not only as victims but also as unwitting perpetrators of a bigger global game played to different rules. The islanders are crushed by extraneous ideological forces that served to create deeper fissures along pre-existing fault lines.⁴⁹ The depiction of setting in the film, I argue, challenges a dominant cultural imagination of a South Korea constructed as victim of external forces.

The narratives of both films centre on the treatment of a corpse, but neither film offers any closure. At the end of *To the Starry Island* the attempt by Mun's son to bury his father on the island ends in failure, and Mun's corpse is burnt at sea; there is no comfortable resolution. In *Spring in My Hometown*, Ch'anghŭi's family can never achieve peace because they can never know if the corpse found in the river was that of their son. At the end of *Spring in My Hometown*, Sŏngmin's disgraced father and sister are forced to leave the village along with the rest of the family on a donkey cart for fear of reprisals by American troops who caught the father stealing. Narrative closure is also hindered by an overall sense of uncertainty that is created through apparent gaps in the narrative: critical events like Ch'anghŭi's death or his alleged arson attack often occur off-screen, and several narrative threads are left unresolved. For instance, in three scenes reference is made to Sang'ŏn—the son of the communist attacked in the opening scene—but the character is dropped halfway through the film, and his ultimate fate is unknown.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Yi Hyoin, *Hanguk ŭi yŏnghwa*, 261 & Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 15.

⁴⁹ Rayns, *Seoul Stirring*, 15.

⁵⁰ In interviews, Yi Kwangmo implies Ch'anghŭi and Sang'ŏn are the same person; Rist and Totaro, "Lee Kwang-Mo," 34.

In neither film, then, is there a discussion of a pre-war idyllic past or a desire to return to a pre-war world. Both films are about leaving and *never* returning. There is no normality to return to; in both films the violence of the reprisals shapes the lives of the protagonists in the film and sets them on a downward trajectory. In neither film is there a return to a harmony that might indicate an acceptance of the Korean status quo—the continued division of the peninsula, which is evidence of the ultimate failure of the Korean War.

Spring in My Hometown has a distinctive visual style, and many of the techniques of cinematography and the editing associated with commercial narrative cinema under which almost all the other Korean War films were made are absent from the film. There are only four close-ups, no shot-reverse shots, no parallel editing, no eye-line matches and no tracking shots. The film consists of 125 individual single shot scenes, each representing a feature of the life of Sŏngmin and Ch'anghŭi.⁵¹ This cinematography, I argue, needs to be understood not in isolation but in relation to other elements of the film's form, especially the soundtrack and the use of text.

David Bordwell, in his analysis of sound in classical narrative film and alternatives to such narratives, argues that sound in film can guide us through images and indicate what we should be watching, but the effect can be very different in *Spring in My Hometown*.⁵² In much classical narrative cinema, sound effects and background noise in a film should provide an overall sense of an environment, and when sounds become obtrusive the sound is often manipulated artificially to guarantee the narrative is clear.⁵³ However, at several points of *Spring in My Hometown* important dialogue is deliberately made to compete with background noise or with music. For example, in the scene where Changhŭi's father approaches Sŏngmin and asks him to confirm what happened to his son, it is revealed that Changhŭi has probably been killed by American troops in revenge for the arson attack and the killing of a GI. However, much of this vital dialogue is obscured by the sound of wind and nature. In many ways, non-Korean viewers can read the subtitles, and therefore occupy a privileged position because they can see what is going on in the narrative, and this to a degree may account for the popularity of *Spring in My Hometown* outside Korea. Another implication of this use of sound is that characters are overwhelmed by their environment. The different vocal qualities suggest Sŏngmin's own perceptual subjectivities; the threats of the baying mob in the opening scene, the anger of the teacher at

⁵¹ So Sŏngmin, "Yi Kwangmo kamdok," 1998.

⁵² David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008): 265 & 9.

⁵³ Bordwell & Thompson, *Film Art*, 269 & 271.

Söngün, the gentle voice of Changhŭi's father that is blotted out by the sound of the wind. There is a deliberate manipulation of the timbre of the voices that fill Söngmin's world.

Another distinctive formal visual feature of *Spring in My Hometown* is fourteen intertitles or brief texts that frame the end and beginning of particular sequences. Each intertitle provides both a running commentary of important events occurring contemporaneously in the Korean War and in the village. For example, the first and eighth intertitles read:

So important was the lighter to Changhŭi, it was as if it were part of his very self.
August 10th 1952
Köje island refugee camp riot, mobs of refugees storm town hall.

Summer returned but Changhŭi did not.
October 14th 1952.
7th UN General Meeting held discussing the Korean crisis.

The intertitles are written like someone returning to entries in a diary and commenting upon these events with the benefit of hindsight. The identity of the narrator is also unclear although one film critic argues this is Söngmin commenting on his past at an undisclosed time.⁵⁴ In silent films and old newsreels, intertitles add dialogue and other descriptive detail not featured in the visual material. In modern films, intertitles are generally inserted to provide a preface or postscript to a film's narrative, provide important historical background and lend authenticity to the film.⁵⁵ In *Spring in My Hometown* it is as if an objective historical text accompanies the village narrative—and in this respect *Spring in My Hometown* resembles other war films that use realia like newspaper headlines or actual battle sequences, as Guy Westwell argues, to encourage the spectator to “understand the action as indexically linked to the war events.”⁵⁶ Village life is grounded in real world events situated within a historical framework.⁵⁷ In a curious reversal, the historical context becomes anonymous, distant, unfathomable, while the fictional events of the village are made real.

I argue the use of intertitles in conjunction with the characteristic cinematography and sound and narrative complexity has a specific effect. The constant use of long shots and indistinct dialogue means it is difficult to identify characters or

⁵⁴ So Söngmin, “Yi Kwangmo kamdok,” 1998.

⁵⁵ Chapman, *War and Film*, 72.

⁵⁶ Westwell, *War Cinema*, 92.

⁵⁷ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 17.

their motivations. The picturesque quality of the long shots raises curiosity for the audience and the visually distant events invite the audience into the narrative, but the long shots do not provide the answers, leaving the audience to use the intertitles and fragments of dialogue to piece together the tragic history of Ch'anghŭi and Sŏngmin. The film continually delays or even denies the resolution of questions (perhaps reflecting the insoluble character of many questions about the Korean War).⁵⁸ The intertitles therefore clarify the narrative: the causation of events, the identity of characters, and the division of the film into two sections—the events leading up to the disappearance of Changhŭi, and the disgrace of Sŏngmin's father. Without the textual clues provided by the intertitles, the audience would be unable to make sense of the events unfolding. I argue the film forces the audience to constitute facts like historians, using fragments of the past to create a history of the war. Members of the audience are compelled to engage with their history by approaching the film like historical detectives, and are repeatedly forced to question what they see distantly and triangulate this information with information they hear in snatches of dialogue and read in the intertitles. I argue these formal qualities do not elicit an empathetic response but a more critical engagement with historical events. Despite Kyung Hyun Kim's claims, the overall impact of this uncertainty and the mental effort required for reconstruction makes for an uncomfortable ride for audiences.

CONCLUSION

Korean War films from different cycles reveal the political and cultural preoccupations of the periods of their construction. However, the films are reliant on contending strands of the same nationalist discourse identified by Standish and Kim. Despite the shifts in the cultural imagining of the Korean War that have accompanied political, social and economic changes, underlying themes about the causes and character of the conflict run true to most Korean War films; particularly the externalization of blame, the focus on violence as a problem solving strategy in the defence of community and nation, and narrative structures and cinematic form that encourage audiences to see complex historical issues as personal, solvable dramas. Two films, *Spring in My Hometown* and *To the Starry Island*, in very different ways, challenge the cultural imagination of the Korean War as implied in the texts of other cycles of Korean War film. *Spring in My Hometown* contests the aforementioned discourses of Korean War cinema to shed light on the tragedy of the war, and in addition attempts a more poetic interpretation of the tragedy of war in the mould of *Ivan's Childhood* (Ivanovo detstvo, dir: Andrei

⁵⁸ Bordwell & Thompson, *Film Art*, 86.

Tarkovsky, 1962) or *Come and See* (Idi i smotri, dir: Elem Klimov, 1985).⁵⁹ Both films shed the baggage of adventure and spectacle that characterised previous cycles and feature greater ambiguity in the treatment of the site of violence away from nationally formative moments. In his analysis of South Korean literature about the Korean War, David McCann argues there is a “selective remembering of the war” in Korean literature.⁶⁰ But both *Spring in My Hometown* and *To the Starry Island* make clear what needs remembering. Both films identify reprisals as a key feature of the Korean War, a phenomenon largely neglected in cinematic analyses of the war. In this sense, both films go further than just offering up a flavour of the past, they give a genuine insight into the events of the period.⁶¹ More than this, these films are provocative because while other cycles of Korean War films demanded a more empathetic response, *Spring in My Hometown* and *To the Starry Island* call for greater internal culpability and implicate the audience in the division and conflict.

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⁵⁹ Chapman, *War and Film*, 73.

⁶⁰ David McCann, “Our forgotten War: The Korean War in Korean and American Popular Culture,” in Jackie Hiltz, Steven I. Levine, & Philip West, *America’s Wars in Asia: A Cultural Approach to History and Memory* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997): 67.

⁶¹ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 25.

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